

NEWS RELEASE

USDA Forest Service Santa Fe National Forest



For Immediate Release

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TWIN HILLS PRESCRIBED BURN TO BEGIN ON THE CAJA DEL RIO PLATEAU

(Santa Fe, NM)—Weather and resource availability permitting, fire managers on the Española Ranger District of the Santa Fe National Forest will use a helicopter to burn approximately 600-800 acres over a 7-day period beginning Monday, May 15th. The Twin Hills Prescribed Burn is located west of Santa Fe in the Caja Del Rio Plateau, approximately 8 miles northwest of the Santa Fe Municipal Airport.

The burn will benefit the plateau's grasslands by reducing encroachment of piñon/juniper and stimulating grass growth. The burn will also turn wildlife habitat toward more historic conditions by creating a diversity of vegetative cover in a mosaic of native grasses and sagebrush. Currently the vegetation is primarily piñon pine and juniper with small amounts of sagebrush and grass. Healthier grasslands will also improve grazing conditions and provide better erosion control.

The proposed burn area was opened to firewood gatherers in 2000. Now that the leftover slash on the ground has seasoned, the next step is the prescribed burning.

The conditions necessary for this burn require lower fuel moistures, lower relative humidity, higher temperatures, and 10-15 mph winds. "People will probably want to know why we're planning to burn here while the rest of the Forest is in fire restrictions," said Sandy Hurlocker, Española District Ranger. "The answer is for fire to give us good results; we need warmer and drier conditions for fire to carry on flat terrain."

Unlike the timbered slopes of the Jemez and Sangre de Cristo mountains where fire restrictions are in place, the risks and hazards in the Caja Del Rio do not warrant restricting public use at this time. Rather than thick forests, the open, patchy vegetation on the plateau means a fire would be very difficult to spread.

"The helitorch will make the difference in whether we meet our objectives," said Lawrence Garcia, District Fire Management Officer. In fact, the use of the helitorch is necessary because fire is unlikely to be as effective using more conventional methods, such as lighting with ground crews.

The helitorch is an aerial ignition device hung from a helicopter. It ignites and disperses lumps of flammable gel that cling to the dried piñon/juniper slash that have been stripped of needles, creating concentrations of heat that will spread fire through grass and sagebrush. The result of the ignition will be pockets of moderate to high intensity fire behavior that will burn the old wood and kill some piñon/juniper, leaving a mosaic, or patchwork, in the burned area.

"Under favorable conditions the prescribed burn will have a low risk of escape," said Garcia, but adds that "to lessen the risk even more, we have divided the total project area into smaller blocks with roads and natural boundaries serving as fire control lines around the burn area." On the day of ignition, if all conditions including: weather, fuels, assigned resources, smoke dispersal and contingency plans are not met, the burn will be rescheduled.

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He noted that additional resources (engines and people) must be available as a contingency. Without these resources, the burn will not occur. As always, the primary consideration of all wildland fire activities—including prescribed fire—is firefighter and public safety.

Smoke emitted from the burn is expected to be low due to the nature of the fuels and may be visible from Santa Fe, Los Alamos, White Rock, Cochiti, along I-25 and NM 599.

If you are interested in learning more about the prescribed burn and would like to see the burn project area, the Española Ranger District will offer a 3-hour Educational Field Trip on Friday, May 12. Anyone interested should meet at 12:00 p.m. at the Santa Fe Municipal Recreation Complex - Pitch Parking Lot and be prepared to drive their personal vehicles. The road to the burn project area, which is a 30-45 minute drive into the Caja Del Rio Plateau, is rough and individuals are advised to drive high clearance vehicles.

